

Message Text

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11

ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8831

C O N F I D E N T I A L BANGKOK 18965

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, TH

SUBJECT: WRAP-UP ON THE FARMERS RALLY

REF: A) BANGKOK 18463; B) BANGKOK 18809; C) FBIS

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BEGIN SUMMARY: IN RETROSPECT, THE NOVEMBER 18-30 FARMERS RALLY IS A MILESTONE IN THE POLITICIZATION AND ORGANIZATION OF SOME MEMBERS OF THE NATION'S LARGEST INTEREST GROUP. WHILE IT IS TRUE THAT THUS FAR ALL THAT THE PROTESTING FARMERS HAVE ACHIEVED IS MORE PROMISES, THEY ARE BUILDING A CASE TO HOLD THE NEXT GOVERNMENT'S FEET TO THE FIRE. AN EQUALLY REMARKABLE ASPECT OF THIS LATEST CONFRONTATION BETWEEN THE LITTLE PEOPLE AND THEIR GOVERNMENT WAS THE ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OF BUDDHIST MONKS WHO DEFIED EARLIER ORDERS FROM THE SANGHA SUPREME COUNCIL FOR ALL MONKS TO STAY AWAY FROM POLITICAL RALLIES AND PROTESTSS. END SUMMARY.

1. THIS LATEST ATTEMPT BY FARMERS, WITH LEADERSHIP AND GUIDANCE FROM THE FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT STUDENTS OF THAILAND (FIST), TO PRESSURE THE GOVERNMENT TO PROVIDE LAND, GUARANTEE RICE PRICES AND CRACK DOWN ON LOANSHARKS AND UNSCRUPULOUS LANDLORDS, BEGAN SLOWLY. INDEED, UNTIL THE FINAL TWO DAYS THERE APPEARED TO BE LITTLE PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR EITHER THE FARMERS OR FIST. THE GOVERNMENT

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TRIED TO IGNORE THE FARMERS AND REJECTED THEIR DEMANDS

AS EITHER ILLEGAL OR BEYOND THE CAPABILITIES OF ANY GOVERNMENT TO FULFILL.

2. BUT FIST AND THE PROTESTORS, WHOSE CORE NUMBERED ABOUT 500 FROM 23 DIFFERENT PROVINCES, WERE OBVIOUSLY PREPARED TO TOUGH IT OUT. THEY WERE ACTIVE THROUGHOUT THE ENTIRE TWO WEEKS TRYING TO DRUM UP SUPPORT FROM LABOR GROUPS AND OTHER STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS. THE NATIONAL STUDENT CENTER OF THAILAND (NSCT) AND THE THAMMASAT STUDENT UNION RALLIED TO THE CAUSE BY THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK. LABOR ACTIVIST THOETPHUM CHAIDI AND STRIKING WORKERS FROM THE THAI METAL DRUM MANUFACTURING COMPANY JOINED THE FARMERS AT THE PRAMEN GROUNDS NOVEMBER 23. STRIKING LABORERS FROM SAMUT SAKHON PROVINCE AND THE TEXTILE WORKERS ASSOCIATION CAME OUT IN SUPPORT OF THE FARMERS ON NOVEMBER 28. SOME MONKS BEGAN APPEARING AT THE PRAMEN GROUNDS IN SUPPORT OF THE FARMERS EARLY IN THE DEMONSTRATION. WHEN THE FARMERS BEGAN THEIR MARCH TO GOVERNMENT HOUSE ON NOVEMBER 29, OVER TWENTY MONKS WERE ON HAND TO LEAD THE PROCESSION WHICH HAD BY THEN SWELLED TO APPROXIMATELY 10,000 PEOPLE, INCLUDING MANY WHO WERE PROBABLY THERE MORE TO OBSERVE THAN TO CHARGE ANY BARRICADES (REF B). THE GOVERNMENT ANNOUNCED AT 0230 ON NOVEMBER 30 THE TERMS OF A DETAILED AGREE-MENT WORKED OUT WITH SEVEN FARMER REPRESENTATIVES AND TWO STUDENT LEADERS FROM THE NSCT AND THE THAMMASAT STUDENT UNION (REF C).

3. HAVING ACHIEVED AT LEAST PROMISES OF FULFILLMENT OF MOST OF THEIR DEMANDS, THE FARMERS ON DECEMBER 1 LEFT BANGKOK IN HIGH SPIRITS. THE DEMONSTRATION, HOWEVER, LEFT UNANSWERED THE QUESTION OF WHY THERE HAVE TO BE HUGE CROWDS BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT WILL CONCEDE ANYTHING, AND WHY THE GOVERNMENT WILL CONCEDE ALMOST ANYTHING ONCE THE DEMONSTRATION IS MENACING ENOUGH. PRUTHISAN CHUMPHON, WRITING IN THE BANGKOK POST ON DECEMBER 3, ADDS THAT THIS RECURRING PATTERN OF INITIAL GOVERNMENT STUBBORNESS FOLLOWED BY A STEADILY WEAKENING POSITION AND ULTIMATELY TOTAL CAPITULATION TO PROTESTORS "ONLY SERVES TO PROVE TO THOSE WITH DEMANDS THAT THE GOVERNMENT LIKES TO BE PUSHED AROUND. MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT PERPETUATES THE IDEA THAT THE POWERS THAT

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BE DO NOT PUT REASON ABOVE STRENGTH."

4. COMMENT: THE ENDURANCE, DETERMINATION, AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFORTS OF THE FARMERS AND FIST IN THIS LATEST CONFRONTATION HAVE BEEN REMARKABLE. THEY BEAR THE STAMP OF SEKSAN PRASOETKUN, FIST'S FIRST SECRETARY GENERAL, AND LONG TIME ADVOCATE OF ORGANIZATION AMONG AND PERSEVERENCE BY THE "PHUUNOI", OR LITTLE PEOPLE, AS THE ONLY WAY TO ACHIEVE

RESULTS IN THAILAND. IT IS LESS CLEAR AT THIS POINT JUST WHAT FINALLY GALVANIZED THE LARGE SCALE SUPPORT FOR THE FARMERS AFTER 11 DAYS OF PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE.

5. FOR THE MOMENT, THE FARMERS AND FIST HAVE SUCCEEDED ONLY IN EXACTING MORE GOVERNMENT PROMISES. BUT THEY HAVE FURTHER DEVELOPED THE POLITICIZATION OF SOME MEMBERS OF THAT NATION'S LARGEST SINGLE INTEREST GROUP, AND HAVE ESTABLISHED A PATTERN OF ACTION THROUGH WHICH OTHER FARMERS WILL BE ABLE TO ATTRACT TOP LEVEL ATTENTION IN THE FUTURE. IF THE FARMERS ARE DISSATISFIED WITH INACTION ON THE RECENT PROMISES AND THE GLIB CAMPAIGN PROMISES TO COME, THEY NOW REALIZE WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT.

6. FOR MANY THAI OBSERVERS, INCLUDING THE FARMERS' SUPPORTERS, HOWEVER, THE MOST DISTURBING ASPECT OF THE DEMONSTRATION WAS THE INVOLVEMENT OF BUDDHIST MONKS. THIS INVOLVEMENT HAS ALREADY SPARKED CONTROVERSY. THE TWENTY MONKS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS PROTEST MARCH DID SO IN CLEAR DEFIANCE OF EARLIER ORDERS FROM THE SANGHA SUPREME COUNCIL FOR ALL MONKS TO STAY AWAY FROM POLITICAL RALLIES AND PROTESTS. KHUKRIT PRAMOT HAS DEFENDED THE ROLE OF THE MONKS, WHILE THREE DIFFERENT WATS HAVE CHOSEN TO EXPEL THREE OF THE MONKS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE NOVEMBER 29 MARCH ON GOVERNMENT HOUSE. IF STUDENT OR OTHER ACTIVIST GROUPS NOW CHOOSE TO RALLY TO THE DEFENSE OF THESE THREE MONKS, THE THAI SANGHA MAY FIND ITSELF EMBROILED IN A MAJOR CONTROVERSY OVER ITS ROLE IN THAI SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AFFAIRS. WE ARE ADDRESSING THIS ISSUE IN A SEPARATE MESSAGE.

MASTERS

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